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Fear of Attack Casts Pall Over Paris Embassy

Terrorist attacks have left a mis-asma of fear hanging over our Paris embassy, which used to be American diplomats' favorite post.

The danger for U.S. personnel in Paris is much higher than the public has been told. I sent my associate Lucette Lagnado to check out reports that had filtered back to Washington. Here's what she found:

After a three-year pattern of random attacks, embassy personnel are edgy. The elegant embassy building on the Place de la Concorde has become a fortress reminiscent of U.S. embassies in Saigon or Beirut. Concrete barriers are positioned strategically around the building; parking is strictly forbidden near the embassy and passing vehicles are scrutinized closely.

A heavy presence of French gendarmes and uniformed guards is in evidence around the embassy building, in addition to Marines stationed at the entrances. Visitors are carefully screened and their belongings examined.

What has turned this Foreign Service plum sour? A mysterious group that calls itself the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction.

Since 1981, its members have struck repeatedly at U.S. diplomats in Paris. Then, in a change of pace and place, they began gunning for Americans in neighboring countries.

The incidents that have cast a chill over the Paris embassy include:

- November 1981: Chris Chapman, the embassy charge d'affaires, was shot at and missed by an unknown assailant as he left his home on the way to work. The gunman was never caught.

- Jan. 18, 1982: Lt. Col. Charles Ray, the military attache, was shot and killed as he left his house to go to the embassy. The Lebanese faction claimed credit; French investigators turned up no suspect.

- April 3, 1982: Yacov Barsimontov, an Israeli diplomat, was killed by what police ballistics tests showed to be the same gun that killed Ray.

- August 1982: A bomb placed under commercial attache Roderick Grant's car fell off as he drove toward the embassy. A French policeman was killed and another was badly wounded as they tried to defuse the bomb, which evidently was meant to go off within the embassy grounds.

- March 1983: The same terrorists tried to assassinate Robert Onan Homme, the American consul-general in Strasbourg. He survived and remains at his post.

- February 1984: Leamon Hunt, a retired Foreign Service officer assigned to head the Sinai Peace Keeping Forces, was gunned down in Rome. Again, the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction claimed responsibility for his brutal murder, and authorities established a link with the incidents in France.

As for the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction, U.S. intelligence sources are pretty well convinced that it is no ragtag group of fanatics, but an organization orchestrated and controlled by a national government: Syria.

Their reasoning is that only a government would have the resources for the planning and manpower that clearly went into the attacks on American personnel. In each case, it was obvious that the targeted diplomat had been under surveillance for an extended period—long enough to learn the smallest details of his working and commuting routines.

Diplomats interviewed confessed that a feeling of anxiety has seriously diluted the heady pleasure they once felt over their assignment in the French capital. Instead of enjoying the lovely city along the lines of the lyrics to "April in Paris," they must be always on guard. When they stroll the famous parks and picturesque boulevards, they keep a sharp eye out for suspicious figures. Assassins may lurk under the chestnut trees.